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ABSTRACT

A critical exploration of the meaning and function of community is the focus of this curriculum unit. It is proposed that students develop projects that are designed to contribute to a community in which they are involved, positing that the leadership and networking skills these students develop over the course of the semester provide them with confidence and direction for the adult world they are about to enter. The unit presents a course overview, student objectives, methodology and assessment materials, a section on student projects and whole class activities, final student presentations, a section on course content, notes for the teacher on how to teach the course, and a contemporary problems project list. (BT)

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Learning Contemporary Problems Through Community Involvement

by

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A Senior Social Studies Elective

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Learning Contemporary Problems Through Community Involvement
A Senior Social Studies Elective

I. Course Overview

Contemporary Problems is a senior-year social studies elective taught at Mohawk Trail Regional High School in Buckland, Massachusetts. Centered around community-based projects, student-generated curriculum, and independent reading, Contemporary Problems offers students the opportunity to define and respond to existing community problems. Each student spends the early part of the course defining community and examining various issues as a large class and in small groups. Students then use the balance of the course, independently or in small groups, to plan and implement community projects designed to address issues of their choice.

While many successful community-service learning units emerge out of existing curriculum, in Contemporary Problems, the curriculum emerges out of student interests, identities, and the projects and issues themselves. At Mohawk Trail Regional High School, a regional school serving nine towns in rural western Massachusetts, Contemporary Problems developed as a response to the frustration and hopelessness observable within the student population. Contemporary Problems provides senior-year students with the necessary support and resources to not only increase their awareness of important social issues, but also to uncover channels of action. Mohawk students have responded to this opportunity by immersing themselves in significant and complex projects that often reflect powerful connections to their personal experiences as rural adolescents. In this way, the course curriculum has encompassed a diverse group of relevant topics, including poverty, hunger, domestic violence, sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy, environmental issues, eating disorders, learning disabilities, students' rights, public access to state lands, and recreational opportunities.

In this sense, preparing to teach a course structured like Contemporary Problems requires teachers to go outside the sphere of the classroom. Because the course can cover a large span of issues and disciplines, teachers should begin to identify individuals both within the larger community and the school who can serve as resources for students engaged in research and projects. Often, teachers and students can collaborate in their efforts to bring in outside speakers on issues of importance to the class. As the course unfolds, teachers will begin to acquire a network of community members and a range of relevant classroom materials, such as films, news articles, and a reading library.

II. Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Comprehend the diverse range of meanings of community and community involvement.
2. Examine the extent to which issues in their lives and reflect broad social concerns.
3. Obtain knowledge on both local and international contemporary problems.
4. Uncover ways in which individuals can act to begin addressing and/or increasing awareness around important issues.
5. Examine ways in which problems in their local community (i.e., hunger, poverty, abuse, etc.) teach us about larger political systems and cultural attitudes.
6. Develop communication skills with local community members, school and town officials, peers, and local politicians and selectpeople.
7. Write contracts, develop plans, construct time-lines, delegate responsibility, and coordinate multi-faceted tasks.
8. Develop problem-solving skills and self-motivation.
9. Develop skills in self-evaluation, documentation, presentation, and public-speaking.

III. Methodology and Assessment

Methods

Contemporary Problems provides teachers with the opportunity to diversify their range of social studies methods and sharpen their skills as facilitators and advisors. In most cases, teachers will be in the position of assisting students in generating ideas, solving problems, and researching answers. Students spend two days a week together as a whole class; the remaining time is spent in conference with the teacher or working in groups or alone on community-based projects. The following outlines some of the activities and lessons that take place during whole-class time throughout the course.

Starting Points:

Students answer the question, "what is community?" by examining various "communities" of which they consider themselves a part. In small groups, students begin to examine both the similarities and differences in those communities to which they belong. The concept of community is built and expanded upon to include increasingly larger circles, such as national, global, and environmental communities. Students begin to identify the relationship between community and self-identity. They begin to examine the factors that make up "membership" in particular communities. Questions, such as "do individuals choose which communities to which they belong or are they assigned?" are explored in small group and large group discussions.

Assignments and activities for this portion of the course include students locating and interviewing (if possible) members of their community (however they have chosen to define the concept) who have contributed in a significant way and sharing their rationale--

orally and in writing--for choosing that particular person. This assignment provides students with the opportunity to explore the many different types of action that constitute community involvement. Students are asked to reflect on one another's choices and to identify those types of contributions that they would not have previously labeled as community involvement. Students begin to examine the difference between "service" and community involvement. Students are also responsible for a more elaborate assignment during the first part of the year that requires them to outline a community problem and/or issue of their choice for the class, assess the current strategies for dealing with the problem, and bring in outside speakers from the community.

This assignment allows students to begin generating ideas for projects. It also allows them to experience working in a group on a complex presentation. After the presentations, students are given time to reflect on the pros and cons of the group experience. Students offer advice to one another on how to overcome group conflict during their upcoming projects. A few students may elect to work alone.

Student Projects and Whole-Class Activities:

Once engaged in projects, students spend the majority of homework and class time working on their particular project either at school or another site. Students need the most support from the teacher in the form of conferences, advising, and trouble-shooting. Each week, students are responsible for checking in individually with the teacher at least on one occasion. At the conference, students bring their portfolio (see Assessment), describe the work they have done over the week, discuss plans for the following week, and outline any problems that they have experienced. Teachers evaluate the students' performance and assist students in locating solutions for any project problems. Most often, teachers direct students on the appropriate people to contact, assist students in resolving group conflict, and discuss anxieties or problems students have in communicating with the adult community.

Time spent together as a whole class includes sharing project progress and/or problems and solving those problems as a large group. The remaining time in-class is spent addressing those issues that encompass student projects. Students are required to engage in independent reading of their choice throughout the semester and to keep a journal. Their reading should shed light on a contemporary problem, and their reactions to the reading and the issue are discussed biweekly in class.

The "text" for Contemporary Problems includes the students' independent reading and research, newspaper articles, speakers, and their experiences in projects. The focus of this "text" is determined by the students' interest and project focus. Out of these assignments evolves the focus and content of the course and the student projects. Students identify those issues and concerns that are of the most importance to them, and the teacher can then follow-up by providing activities, assignments, and resources that cater more specifically to the class's needs. For instance, in the spring of 1997 *The Boston Globe* published a series of articles on poverty and it s attendant social problems in rural Massachusetts which we assigned to our classes for reading. The reading was followed by

class discussion and a writing assignment. Since many students had elected to work on issues of poverty (some students elected to work on the garden and greenhouse project, some volunteered at a day care center for young mothers, some worked at a homeless shelter, and two decided to use their musical talents and stage a benefit concert), the assignment enabled those students to more fully understand the economic and political causes and social consequences of rural poverty.

Final Student Presentations:

As the course draws to an end, students begin preparing their portfolios. As a final activity, students display their portfolio to the class and give a short talk on their experience--the outcome, the problems they faced, what they learned about themselves, and the issue (see below).

Assessment

Portfolios

Portfolio-based assessment is highly compatible with a course structured in a way similar to Contemporary Problems for several reasons. First, each students is engaged in a different project and, in many ways, a different course of study. Portfolios offer each student a vehicle by which they can express the individuality of their particular work. Second, many projects are done in groups, and students often spend a significant amount of time working out and learning about group dynamics. Individual portfolios provide students with an opportunity to reflect on their personal contributions to their projects. Students are required to document their individual efforts and are evaluated as individuals. This method of assessment has proven to prompt students to contribute equally to projects and to resolve group conflicts quickly and successfully. Third, portfolios ask students to be accountable for their progress and performance. Each week students are required to update their portfolio and hold conferences with the teacher. The portfolio offers a glimpse at the work that has been accomplished and the work that still needs to be done.

The portfolio can contain items of the student's choice, but must contain the following: the project contract, evidence of weekly progress, a teacher/student signature worksheet that reflects a weekly conference and evaluation. Students bring their portfolio with documentation of their work to their weekly conference and are evaluated weekly based on their progress, their ability to solve those problems that arose, and their overall plan for the remainder of the course. The conferences and portfolios allows students to communicate on a consistent basis with teachers on any potential problems.

Students are also encouraged to include any of the following in their portfolio on a weekly basis: bibliographies, research, publicity, newspaper clippings, memos, photos, video, art work, graphics, advertisements, etc. As students approach the end of the

course, they begin planning their portfolio presentation. Students choose from the materials they have collected over the course of their project four or five that best represent the work they have accomplished. The final portfolio includes those four or five pieces that are shared with the class, the contract itself, a written self-evaluation describing the extent to which the student fulfilled his/her contract, a second self-evaluation discussing what the student has learned over the course of the year, and a written summary describing the project and its outcome. After presentations and sharing, the portfolios are handed in to the teacher. The students are evaluated based on their class presentation, the contents of their portfolio, their written summaries and self-evaluations, and their ability to communicate with the teacher and one another effectively over the course of the semester.

IV. Course Content

Our students spend the early portion of the semester organizing in class presentations on various contemporary issues and interviewing local people and researching historical figures involved in the community. All of these activities are designed to stimulate project ideas and illustrate the richness of local community involvement while increasing their awareness of contemporary issues. This is accomplished by means of guest speakers, videos, discussion of news stories, readings, oral reports, and class discussion. All of the topics and materials for these activities are selected and organized by the students and as a result they vary from year to year; however, they often include hunger, poverty, eating disorders, animal rights, abortion, environmental problems, and students rights. In addition we ask the students to do extensive self-selected reading and to respond to that reading in a journal and bi-weekly class discussion.

While all of this is going on we use class discussion first to illicit student definitions of community involvement, second to ask the question "why should I get involved in my community?" and third to introduce and define the project itself. This process of discussion and definition is crucial to the success of most students and should be given sufficient focus by the teacher. It is important because this process provides the students with a framework within which to select a project meaningful to them. We spend a week or so of class time brainstorming, listing, researching, discussing, and meeting with each student for the purpose of selecting a project. This time also allows them to determine if they would like to work alone or in a group.

Once a topic is chosen an important early step for each student is to clearly define their project, write a plan and develop a contract in a series of conferences with the instructor. This contract, if sufficiently detailed, is a useful tool for both the student and the teacher. For the student it serves as an organizing tool, a plan of action, and a schedule. For the teacher it serves as a guide for assessment throughout the project. Students should all use a standard contract form, however the form, structure, and content of the contract is most effective if it is developed jointly by students and the teacher in a

large group setting. Elements of the contract we have found essential include a brief description of the project, overall project goals, a timeline establishing a schedule for specific tasks, some means of determining when the project is complete, and student and teacher signatures.

Implementing the projects is exciting and challenging for the teacher, requiring flexibility, a broad base of knowledge, awareness of community issues and contacts, and patience. The range of topics can be daunting. Over the past two years our students have purchased, built and equipped a greenhouse, planted a garden to raise food for a local food pantry, taught music, art, and computer classes in the middle school, volunteered at a homeless shelter, staged benefit concerts for hunger and homelessness, published a field trip guide to the Deerfield River Watershed, implemented recycling programs, developed and run after school recreation programs, built a climbing wall and many more. Some of these projects were done individually, some in groups but they all required tremendous commitment and effort from the students and teachers involved. What is important however, is that working on these projects provided our students with real world experience and the opportunity to develop real world skills.

Perhaps the most satisfying aspect of these projects for the teacher is assisting and watching students develop these skills. In order to accomplish these projects our students were required to meet with school officials, develop lesson plans, coordinate construction projects, consult with various experts, raise funds, meet with local politicians and town officials, attend town meetings, develop computer skills, develop phone skills, arrange advertising campaigns, solicit donations of materials, submit grant proposals and much more. For them to develop these skills it is important for the teacher to define their own role quite carefully and to resist doing the students work for them. Our role in this course is to act as coach and advisor and to intervene only when it is essential. For example, on a typical day during mid-semester, we might refer students to a gardening book for planting dates, visit a local preschool to observe students implementing a lesson with young children, help students prepare for a meeting with school officials regarding our recycling program, and intervene in on-going projects where students need encouragement, alternatives, resources, or motivation.

V. Preparing to Teach--How to Make It Work

Admittedly, this is an unusual and challenging course to teach. Given the nature of the course--the amount of curriculum that can be covered during a given semester and the broad range of projects that take place, we would like to offer some suggestions for thinking about and planning for the course. First, assess your own level of interest in teaching a project-based social studies-elective. As it has been taught at Mohawk Trail Regional High School, Contemporary Problems is appropriate for teachers who are eager to locate learning experiences outside the classroom and who can exhibit all those qualities necessary to operate in such an environment, including flexibility, willingness to allow

students to take risks, comfort with occasional confusion, and readiness to learn unfamiliar subject areas with students.

Assuming your own interest and readiness to teach in such a setting exists, enlisting the support of your principal, staff, and administration is the first step to ensure that the course can take place in a comfortable and supportive environment. Demonstrating the advantages of such a course to the school community is perhaps the best method. Students, of course, are the first and most important beneficiaries. At Mohawk, we have found that Contemporary Problems provides our students with a number of important learning experiences including, but not limited to, the following:

- The opportunity to gain real world experience.
- The opportunity to engage in meaningful work.
- The chance to practice the traditional academic skills of reading, writing, speaking, and computing in authentic settings.
- The chance to work in a natural interdisciplinary experience.
- The opportunity to establish meaningful goals and experience the bumpy road to their fruition.

The larger school community benefits as well. Mohawk has seen those positive effects created by a course like Contemporary Problems that include the following:

- The work of students in the greater community generates positive publicity and public relations.
- Students who work in the school building assist overworked teachers and staff members.
- Student projects may bring together several disciplines and, therefore, prompt interdisciplinary cooperation between faculty members.
- Overall, by bringing together various groups within the school, creating school-wide learning experiences, such as Awareness Weeks, and spearheading projects that involve the school in new and exciting areas, the entire process creates a stronger sense of community in the school.

Managing the details of Contemporary Problems and keeping track of students' progress can be difficult alone. In this way, team teaching is ideal for a course of this nature. Team teaching allows each teacher to more closely supervise the work of the students and to be more available for conferences and evaluation of portfolios. We have taught the course both ways at Mohawk and team teaching has significant advantages however it is certainly possible to teach the course alone.

Mohawk Contemporary Problems Project List

*Planting a garden to grow food for a local food pantry
*Buying, building, and equipping a greenhouse to support the garden
*Working at the local senior center
*Working in local town offices
*Researching and publishing a field trip guide to the Deerfield River Watershed
*Organizing a 30 hour fast to raise money for Oxfam America
*Raising money to equip a weight room for Mohawk students
*Teaching music, art, computers, and cooking to middle school students
*Developing and operating a paper recycling program
*Organizing a series of whole school presentations on diversity
*Working at a homeless shelter
*Organizing after school recreational programs (basketball, karate, arts camp)
*Organizing benefit concerts for homeless shelters and hunger relief organizations
*Raising funds for, planning, and building a climbing wall for the Mohawk community
*Developing and leading creative writing groups for middle school students
*Creating a Hyper-Card tutorial for accounting and EMT classes
*Working at the local animal shelter
*Working to help restore The Bridge of Flowers-a local attraction in Shelburne Falls
*Working as teachers assistants in the elementary schools
*Working with local and statewide officials to improve public access to Catamount State Forest
*Working in a local pre-school
*Construction of a sound booth for the Mohawk Music Department

Organizations We Have Worked With

*Ox-Fam America
*Western Mass Food Bank
*The Ashfield Pantry
*The Town of Shelburne
*The Town of Buckland
*The Town of Colrain
*The Shelburne Falls Senior Center
*Buckland Shelburne Regional School
*Hawlemont Regional School
*Colrain School
*The Silver Street Inn-Homeless Shelter
*Greenfield Area Animal Shelter
*The Mary Lyon Education Fund
*Zoar Outdoor Rafting Center
*George Dole Construction
*Western Mass Electric
*The Franklin County Technical School
*The Women's Club of Shelburne Falls
*The Shea Theater
*The Mohawk Athletic Association
*The Mohawk Music Association
*Franklin County Solid Waste Management

Kevin Freitas and Julianne Eagan are pleased to speak with any teacher interested in developing a course similar to *Learning Contemporary Problems Through Community Involvement*. Do not hesitate to contact them through their email addresses:

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